

Event Report

Unleashing Connectivity for Inclusive Growth Leveraging Himalayan Consensus to Further India's Act East Policy

Tuesday, 23 January, 2018, India International Centre, New Delhi



Introduction

1. CUTS International (CUTS), Himalayan Consensus Institute (HCI), Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), and The Asia Foundation (TAF) organised a panel discussion titled “Unleashing Connectivity for Inclusive Growth – Leveraging Himalayan Consensus” in New Delhi on 23rd January.
2. The meeting introduced the idea behind Himalayan Consensus process to the larger audience in Delhi with an aim to develop an initial framework on how this platform can be used to usher connectivity and people to people contact. In a moderated session, speakers reflected on the work of their institutions and how that may shape up the discourse especially in context the larger Act East discourse for India, together with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, in the interests of furthering connectivity.
3. The panel included Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International; Laurence J. Brahm, Chair, Himalayan Consensus Institute; Mallika Shakya, Assistant Professor, South Asian University; Sagar Prasai, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation; and Sreemati Chakrabarti, Vice-Chairperson and Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi. The talk was moderated by Sujeev Shakya, Chairperson, Nepal Economic Forum.
4. The event was attended by around 40 participants representing key think-tank bodies, media houses, former diplomats, academicians and students. It was successful in bringing out more people-to-people dimensions of connectivity in the Himalayan region and in understating the current regional connectivity discourse from that perspective.

Detailed Proceedings

5. Introducing the idea behind Himalayan Consensus, Laurence J. Brahm discussed its background and motivation. He underlined that the scope of the initiative aims at engaging with social enterprises nestled in the Himalayan region that aim to protect, nurture and carry forward local culture, heritage, environment, values and systems by developing sustainable business models rather than depending upon aid. Himalayan Consensus is an alternative to unilateral ways of implementation of development programmes as it emphasises upon multilateral and organic processes of assessing and assisting in development needs, in cognisance of grassroots concerns.
6. He defined the Himalayan region as home to glaciers and river support systems which consists of fragile ecosystem and is assaulted with unsustainable economic growth trajectory. According to him, the idea of unleashing connectivity is about all the countries sharing this complex topography coming together for ecological conservation and to reverse the potential disasters in the region by developing and promoting sustainable and inclusive ways and means of livelihood. To that end, he emphasised that Kathmandu is suitably placed to represent the Himalayan region as an alternative

to Davos that hosts the annual World Economic Forum, and the Himalayan Consensus resonates with the spirit of the idea.

7. According to Laurence, economic disempowerment and identity marginalisation in the region are one of the essential causes behind conflict. As such HCI provides opportunities for young business leaders, non-government organisations and community leaders to work together for driving positive political, social, economic and environmental changes.
8. He also highlighted the progress made in the region in terms of attracting foreign investment in areas such as renewable energy and disaster management and the need for outcome-oriented policy prescriptions that further such investments.
9. He asserts that the biggest problem in the region is infrastructure connectivity as the major provinces are landlocked and surrounded by difficult mountain terrains. Without infrastructure connectivity, none of the provinces in the region can potentially benefit from mainstream economic development elsewhere. Rethinking of prevalent economic model is required in context of unique accessibility and development need of the Himalayan region as it will not only promote harmony among differing ethnic, environment and economic interests but will induce inclusive economic empowerment of communities in and around the region.
10. In concluding remarks, Laurence stressed the need of preserving water resources in the Himalayan region. As climate change has induced higher glacier retreats and more incidences of erratic weather patterns, it is imperative to bring all the Himalayan countries to a common platform for devising far-sighted solution that not only benefit the connectivity agenda but also takes in to consideration environmental protection. By taking China's example on solving connectivity issues through infrastructural and regulatory interventions, he underlined the need to learn from China's model and rethink the economic model in the Himalayan context by investing in business models that are smart, green and blue.
11. Bipul Chatterjee gave a brief about CUTS work in BBIN region (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and explained the concept of connectivity by looking through the tangible pillars of land-based transportation (road and railways) connectivity, waterways connectivity (rivers and sea) and energy connectivity. With regards to land-based transportation connectivity, CUTS is documenting connectivity gaps (like infrastructural impediments near land-custom stations, road conditions, etc) through extensive field surveys along critical corridors in the BBIN countries and have been expansively engaging with the government and other multi-lateral agencies through advocacy initiatives at local, sub-regional, and regional levels in filling up these gaps (hard and soft infrastructure related).
12. He highlighted that CUTS is also implementing a project on inland waterways connectivity in the BBIN region that aims to look at this developmental proposition by taking into consideration its livelihoods and gender implications. Through this project

CUTS has been able to create alternative policy discourses for enabling reform measures on inland waterways to ensure better regional connectivity and river-to-bay connectivity in the BBIN region. In terms of energy connectivity, CUTS is implementing regional projects that aim at identifying the key drivers for cross border energy cooperation, economic and revenue gains accruing to the countries in the region, and the key policy bottlenecks that can hinder such regional integration.

13. Bipul stressed that land-locked geographies should be seen as land-linked, pointing out that multi-lateral institutions (like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, *et al*) are looking at providing more infrastructural impetus to fill these connectivity gaps. He said for the success of such interventions, it is imperative to secure the buy-in from the people on ground as many find it difficult to understand and identify their potential gains from such initiatives. Therefore, CUTS through its evidence-based research has been able to bring forward the grassroots perspective to the policymakers and in making them an integral part of this development discourse.
14. He also emphasised on integrating private sector participation in the connectivity development discourse and in understanding what is hindering active private sector participation in the BBIN region. In sum, he stressed the importance of promoting multimodal connectivity (road, railways, waterways and sea) for seamless flow of trade and tourism in the BBIN region sub-region and the greater Bay of Bengal Region including Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. This can only be achieved by effective policy coordination among these countries and in realising the larger benefits of regional connectivity.
15. After highlighting the evolution of ICS as an organisation since 1969, Sreemati Chakrabarti stated that ICS is the only multi-disciplinary think tank in India for the study of China from an Indian angle. Acting as an interface between the government and various organisations in the country, ICS has been involved with Track 2 initiatives. The overlapping of interest in the area of connectivity between the ICS and Himalayan Consensus can be used as a platform to discuss the matters pertaining to the enhancement of regional connection.
16. She emphasised on the “connectivity in a more pluralist form” in the neighbouring Asian states – South-East Asia – for which participation and collaboration of various institutions in the region is integral. Unleashing connectivity seems to have become integral as the various sub-groups in the region, such as the BBIN, the BCIM, are taking leadership on implementing the co-operation agendas. Nonetheless, South Asia is one of the most connectivity deficient regions in the world. Lack of connectivity in the region limits the proliferation of the inter-regional trade in South Asia. In this scenario, she argued that the role of Himalayan Consensus can be crucial to discuss specifics regarding the problems to achieve connectivity or the best substitutes, alternatives and solutions, especially when international fund raising, which given the present connectivity deficit is a considerable challenge. She also urged to look into academic connectivity pillar by facilitating more educational international exchange programmes in the Himalayan region.

17. Mallika Shakya underscored the importance of conceptualising the idea of the Himalayas, borders, regions – what really constitutes this huge geographical construct? Taking into consideration her work as a sociologist, an economic anthropologist and a policy expert, she spoke how important it is to understand the concept of Himalaya from a non-Himalayan perspective. She posed questions like how to conceptualise South Asia, what embodies South Asia and which brings into question what is Himalaya and how it can be seen within Himalaya and also from the outside. To understand the present realities in the Himalayan context, she emphasised the importance of exploring the historical trajectory of human connectivity including movements of businessmen, traders, relatives, workers and soon across the region. She also underlined the need to look into India's Act East Policy not only from a Himalayan perspective but also looking at the changing multipolar global landscape that we all are part of.
18. She also informed the audience that how different and complex regional connectivity and integration in South Asian region is as compared to East Africa or any other regional grouping. Nepal being a "landlocked" country is looked as a biggest deterrent to its economic growth whereas such issues are not a matter of concern in other regional grouping like that in East Africa and other similar models. There is a need to change attitudes and prospection at both sides of the border, only then will the Himalayan region be able to reap the benefits of regional connectivity in a holistic manner.
19. Highlighting the nature of work that The Asia Foundation (TAF) is involved with, Sagar Prasai stressed on the importance of regional integration. Given the fact that TAF is spanned across 18 countries in Asia, having physical connectivity is vital but it is also a "developmental problem". He emphasised on the regional complexities which adds up to the problematic geography of the SAARC, thus inhibiting regional co-operation in a constructive manner. In terms of waterways connectivity, he said that the new water management technologies are not reflected in geopolitical agenda and institution dealing with the prevailing educational system.
20. He also argued that for any sort of connectivity China should be taken into consideration being another biggest economic and human resource provider in the region. On the regional issue, he opined that in case of India, focus should be given on stabilising its relation with its neighbours lying on the western side as the reward of "stabilising the west and integrating the east" will be of two different scale.
21. Sujeev Shakya, moderator of the panel, summarised on the need of using the platform of Himalayan Consensus to further the connectivity discourse across many areas. Apart from various forms of connectivity as discussed by the panelists, he stressed the need to look into the technological connectivity aspect of regional connectivity in the Himalayas. He also emphasised on engaging youth in the discourse and informed on the Youth Forum at the upcoming Himalayan Consensus Summit in Kathmandu in March 2018, to be held jointly with Himalayan University Consortium of International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD).